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SUBJECT: RUSSIA: STAFFDEL ANAND EXPLORES POLITICAL SITUATION

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#### Summary

1. (U) A four-person staff delegation from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs visited Moscow August 25-29 to explore political developments in the run-up to parliamentary elections in December and the presidential election next year. During their visit they met with a range of Russian officials, NGOs, political opposition leaders and a member of the media. They discussed prospects for opposition parties in the Duma elections, the work of NGOs, and bilateral issues. In a meeting with a member of the Duma, they also discussed the Duma-House exchange and the next committee meeting in Moscow. End summary.

#### Background

2. (U) Staffdel Anand visited Moscow August 25-29 as part of a multi-country trip to Central Asia, Russia and Georgia. The delegation was comprised of professional staff of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and included Mr. Manpreet Singh Anand (majority), Mr. Gene Gurevich (minority), Ms. Melissa Adamson (majority) and Dr. Amanda Sloat (majority), who led the Russia portion of their trip.

#### Prospects for the Duma elections

3. (SBU) In meetings with leaders of two opposition political parties - Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (SPS) - the staffdel heard about the difficulties opposition parties will have in meeting the seven percent threshold to enter the Duma. Representatives of both parties commented on discussions that have taken place about merging their parties. Despite the fact that joining forces would improve prospects for representation in the Duma, the two parties have been unable to reach agreement. Now, under the law, it is too late to create a new party and coalitions are illegal.

4. (SBU) SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh believed that if SPS and Yabloko combined lists, the merged party would have little problem achieving seven percent. Belykh said different ideas and ideologies prevented an SPS-Yabloko merger. Sergey Ivanenko, Deputy Chair of Yabloko, attributed the stalemate to a lack of agreement over the "brand" of the merged party. Ivanenko went on to say that "creating something new in Russia right now is risky," citing the Republican Party of Russia as an example. (Recently, the Republican Party was denied registration leaving its leader, Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov, without a party list to run on.)

5. (SBU) Opposition party officials as well as NGOs complained about lack of access to the central media. While there is still some

opportunity for independent points of view to be expressed in some newspapers, TV access is limited, they said. "The problem in Russia is that you need TV in order to promote a leader," noted Ivanenko. Radio station "Ekho Moskv" Editor Aleksey Venediktov commented that although his radio station continues to operate freely, the trend in Russia is toward "controlled information space."

16. (SBU) Aleksey Adrov, Chief of Staff at the Central Election Commission, told the staffdel that there have been no complaints about media access. With regard to the last Duma election "no irregularities come to mind," he stated. Adrov expected 10-15 parties to take part in the Duma elections. In answer to a question about the recent increase in the threshold needed to gain seats in the Duma from five percent to seven percent, he said that on a practical level the increase will not make a difference, as "opposition parties usually get three percent or nine percent." Adrov noted that all participating parties would be able to field election observers, and that he expected the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to send long and short-term observers, as well.

#### NGOs Struggle under New NGO Law

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17. (SBU) Every NGO that the staffdel met with complained about the staff time required to comply with all the reporting requirements mandated by the 2006 NGO law. Rose Gottemoeller, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, added that in addition to the burdensome requirements, NGOs are now less willing to take risks. While all the NGOs the staffdel met with, including the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Memorial, and Transparency International reported that they continued to work unhindered, they were well aware that the complex law meant that they could potentially be accused of being in noncompliance at any time.

18. (SBU) On a positive note, Gottemoeller said there is excitement

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surrounding the upcoming meeting of the unofficial Carnegie-GOR Ombudsman democracy and human rights working group scheduled to convene in Washington in September. She told the delegation that participants in the working group are interested in having meetings on Capitol Hill.

19. (SBU) Deputy Ombudsman Georgiy Kunadze told the staffdel that his office handles about 3,000 cases a year. The majority are "routine" complaints on economic and social rights. The Ombudsman's annual report was "not very different" from the State Department human rights report. (Note: in fact, the Ombudsman's annual report focuses more heavily on social and economic rights, and generally reports violations that have been brought to its attention, instead of actively seeking information on human rights problems.) He told the delegation that the biggest human rights problem in Russia today is "bureaucratic indifference and neglect."

#### The Bilateral Relationship

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10. (SBU) The delegation met with Duma Deputy Aleksey Likhachev, a member of the United Russia faction and deputy chairman of the Committee on Political Economics, Entrepreneurship and Tourism. Likhachev visited Washington in June as part of the Duma-House exchange. He told the delegation he would like to see economics placed ahead of politics in the relationship between the U.S. and Russia. He invited the delegation to observe the December Duma elections in his home district of Nizhny Novgorod. He said efforts are needed to bring the current period in our relationship, which he described as "mutual criticism" to an end. A "cooling period" is needed, he said.

11. (SBU) In a meeting with Oleg Burmistrov, Deputy Director of North American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, many issues were discussed, most notably CFE and missile defense. Burmistrov stated that these two areas are the only ones where problems exist in our relationship. In other areas there is

cooperation, he told the delegation. He restated the Russian position on CFE, missile defense, and discussed the recent overflights in Georgia.

¶12. (SBU) Several interlocutors raised Jackson-Vanik as a continued sticking point in the relationship. Ekho Moskvyy's Venediktov noted that the elite in Russia did not understand why the amendment is still in place. He commented that while the amendment has no practical effect, it is a symbol. "It is an artificial irritant which annoys people who make decisions. This small barrier creates a huge psychological barrier," he said.

¶13. (U) Staffdel Anand cleared this cable.